been slowly disintegrating under manifold pressures. 511
In prosperous periods in the past a delicate balance 182
of human and economic factors fostered a crowded, conformist, but on the whole, harmonious village life. Recent decades have seen the old harmony replaced by tension and a predatory struggle for survival. And, despite the isolation of most villages, ideas and ideals from the West have slowly undermined the authority of the older mores and customary laws.

Despite all the fissures that have developed, it 178
is well to remember that peasant life everywhere has a tremendous inertia, that it is incredibly resistant to all the forces of change. Thus, much of the sweeping change that occurred in city life under comparable pressures did not occur in the peasant villages.

The main economic and social unit of the village 527
is the family, and a special study is devoted to that 262
subject. Here we shall sketch the rhythm of village life and something of its annual cycle of activity.

The New Year holiday, for the people of China, the first fifteen days of the year, is the main period of leisure for the villagers. Food is prepared in advance, and even the women may rest from their cooking during the first five days of the holiday. The town is decorated with nien-hua (New Year's pictures) and ch'un-lien (paired New Year's Day mottoes). Visiting friends and relatives, gambling, eating the best food of the year, wearing the best clothes, and indulging the children make this the most festive period of the year. For many familities it is the only time in the year when they can afford to eat meat dishes. The

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special dishes of the season vary from province to province. In a northern province such as Honan, chiao-tzu (meat dumplings) are particular favorites; as one moves south, rice-based delicacies such as nien-kao (year cakes) figure more prominently in the New Year's feasts. Besides being a time of celebration, the New Year is also the time for settling accounts, and, for many farmers there has been little left for celebrating when the creditors have all been dealt with.

The regular work of the agricultural year begins immediately after the New Year. In Honan the farming cycle is governed by the need to conserve water and by the demands of the principal crops: wheat, millet, kaoliang. From the Yangtze south through the Central-South Region, the year is phased by the steps in wet rice cultivation. In early spring, the Honan farmer begins his year-long effort to conserve moisture that has accumulated in the soil during the autumn and winter rains. About half of the fields are then in winter fallow awaiting the spring planting; the rest are planted in winter wheat. Fertilizer from the household pit is spread on the fallow fields. The wheat is brought to maturity by careful hoeing and by hand irrigation using well water -- a back-breaking operation in which the farmer is helped by his whole family.

In April or May comes the time to plant his remaining fields in millet, kaoliang, or cotton; often he must irrigate to assure the germination of seeds. Then comes the time to harvest the wheat, and once again the farmer calls on his whole family and often on his neighbors for harvesting, threshing, and winnowing, all done by hand with the greatest care to

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and city dwellers kept their ties with their native villages, returned there whenever possible, and many saw commercial activity in the town only as means of the acquisition of sufficient wealth to buy farming land upon their return to the village. The town population, then, is mostly made up of artisans and peasants, plus a small number of landlords, retired officials, county functionaries, and established merchant families. The county seats (hsien capitals) were the centers for tax collection and administration of the surrounding farm-villages and also served as market towns where the peasant might sell his crop and purchase the manufactured goods he could not produce.

Town life for the average artisan was as meager as that of his relatives in the village. Long hours, hard work, low pay, few holidays were the lot of most, and living conditions were generally poorer and more crowded than those in the villages. Proprietors of many shops required their employees to live on the premises, so that they seldom visited their families. The diet of the town dweller was as poor as that of the poor farmer -- mostly cereals, vegetables, and some condiments, and meat and fruit on holidays only. Brief holidays were allowed at the New Year, the Ch'ing-ming festival, the mid-Autumn festival, and the Dragon Boat festival. On these occasions, townspeople usually tried to return to their villages; if this was impossible they enjoyed such delicacies as they could afford and strolled the streets, perhaps visiting friends and attending seasonal fairs and theaters.

Life in the towns was, then, closely linked with village life. But in the provincial capitals, such as